

REDEEMER SEMINARY

LUKE 16:1-13
THE PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD

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I understand and have not violated the Seminary's position on plagiarism.
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The parable of the unjust steward at the beginning of Luke 16 is arguably one of the most difficult Lukan (or Synoptic) parables to understand. Interpreters over the years have taken various liberties with missing and seemingly contradictory details, yielding a wide range of proposed meaning. At first glance, the parable appears to commend dishonesty and acting in one's own self-interest at all costs, but this interpretation can hardly hold weight placed alongside the rest of the kingdom ethic Jesus presents throughout the rest of the Lukan and Gospel material. Given the parable's literary function of setting forth two (related) levels of meaning for the audience, closely considering linguistic, text critical and various contextual matters, the reader more clearly perceives the parable's two levels of meaning: literal and metaphorical. Specifically, the following material will seek to answer the following questions: What is the basis of the commendation from ὁ κύριος in verse eight and in what way does the parable function as ethical teaching?

History of Interpretation

Part of the debate regarding the interpretation of this parable has stemmed from differing viewpoints on the nature of Jesus' parables themselves. For the purposes of this study, we shall assume Margaret Boucher's definition: "It is a structure consisting of a tropical narrative, or a narrative having two levels of meaning; this structure functions as religious or ethical rhetorical speech."¹ Thus, parables that are 'mysterious' in nature are not to be deemed 'inauthentic' sayings of Jesus as some have proposed; to the contrary, the mysterious language itself proves that the parable should in fact be evaluated as a parable.

¹ M. Boucher, "The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study" in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 6* (The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1977), 23.

Given the parable's notoriety in giving even the most astute readers difficulty, it is wise to begin by taking a quick survey of major lines of interpretation over time. The traditional line of interpretation holds that the κύριος of verse eight commends the steward for his shrewdness, neglecting to comment on the steward's dishonest acts, both at the beginning and end of the parable.² Proponents of this view see the parable as an 'exemplary story,' urging disciples of Jesus to act equally radically in the environment they find themselves in, namely the arrival of the kingdom.³ The primary proposed interpretation that competes with the traditional view is connected to J.D. Derrett, who posits that the steward's reducing of debts at the end of the story is not dishonest; the steward is labeled 'unjust' in verse eight merely due to the allegations brought against him by the master in verse two.⁴ Derrett and others propose that the steward is reducing his own commission with no negative impact on his master.⁵ Those that have followed in Derrett's footsteps propose that the parable teaches about the right use of resources and righteousness of God's standards.⁶ N.T. Wright and Kenneth Bailey both focus on the master's mercy throughout the parable and suggest that the parable functions as an 'eschatological warning,' urging sinners to hope wholeheartedly in the mercy of God.⁷ In addition to these, many less common interpretations have arisen, including seeing the steward as a representation of Jesus (and the parable as defending his 'rogue ministry of grace') and focusing on the

² K. R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 407.

³ K. R. Snodgrass, *Stories*, 407.

⁴ K.R. Snodgrass, *Stories*, 407

⁵ K. R. Snodgrass, *Stories*, 407.

⁶ K.R. Snodgrass, *Stories*, 407

⁷K.R. Snodgrass, *Stories*, 407-408

foolishness of the master for his apparent lack of concern for the steward's dishonesty.⁸ This short survey of interpretation highlights the fact that one must work diligently in observing the text itself and its context in order to produce a faithful interpretation, aligned with both Jesus and Luke's intention for their respective audiences.

Arriving at the Literal or First-Level of Meaning

Given the literary nature of a parable, one must begin the search for metaphorical meaning by examining the first-level or literal meaning given by the words and context themselves. In examining the parable, the first question one must address is the structure of Luke 15:1-13; Where does the parable and its interpretation end and Luke's redaction begin? Clearly all of these verses are related by the theme of money, but it is not clear which verses (if any) have been added by Luke. Verse eight and nine are the source of contention, but commentators disagree on where to make the dividing line. The word ὅτι in verse eight is clearly pertinent to the discussion, along with its variant given by the N.A. 27 text: διο λεγω ὑμιν (D a r¹) "therefore, I say to you." Both ὅτι and διο λεγω ὑμιν carry the same force, connecting the previous statement (or whole parable) with the following explanation; however, the variant reading seems to offer a more marked transition point by clarifying the speaker and would be redundant, given the start of the next verse "And I say to you." Given the weak external and internal attestation, ὅτι is likely original and is also likely part of the original parable, followed by an interpretation starting in verse 9. The sayings following verse nine build on the theme of stewardship, but it may be more likely that these verses were added by Luke.

⁸K.R. Snodgrass, *Stories*, 409.

In closely examining the Greek text of Nestle-Aland 27, several linguistic matters surface that affect the understanding of the parable. First, the phrasing of the master's initial confrontation with the steward "τί τοῦτο ἀκούω περὶ σοῦ;" implies that he expects the charges to be true.⁹ In addition to this, the steward does not deny nor try to dispute the charges; instead, he begins to think about how he will survive unemployment (verse three). Second, the verb διασκοπίζω is used, tying this parable to its predecessor the parable of the prodigal son, in which the son also "squanders" the father's inheritance. This intentional echoing will serve as a key to interpreting the parable in its Lukan context. Third, the infinitive σκάπτειν implies that the steward had little recourse in terms of finding a career in the same field; digging was seen as the most difficult kind of work, left to the uneducated.¹⁰ Fourth, the word ἐπήσεν clearly has a positive connotation, used elsewhere in Romans 15:11 and 1 Corinthians 11:2. Some attempt to resolve the difficulty of the master's commendation by claiming that it is not in fact a commendation at all, however both ἐπήσεν and φρονίμως have a positive connotation. Lastly, the verb δέχομαι clearly means "to welcome," but it is especially thought of in association with hospitality.¹¹ There is every indication that the steward felt the need to buy the debtors' favor by reducing their debts. Finally, excluding a few variant readings the word καθίσας is used in verse six, which can be translated "sit down quickly and write..." as an attendant circumstance participle.¹² In opposition to those who believe the steward's reducing of debts was not

⁹ D.L. Bock, *Luke II, 9:51-24:53*. (ECNT 2; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1327.

¹⁰ BAGD, 926.

¹¹ BAGD, 220.

¹² D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 640-645.

dishonest, this phrase paints the picture that the steward is in a desperate situation calling for desperate measures.

The second major consideration to arrive at an appropriate literal meaning of the parable is the historical and cultural context. For this parable in particular, the importance of this factor alone cannot be overemphasized. In the first century Greco-Roman world, debt was a large and growing problem, seen largely as a chain of dependency and obligation.¹³ Freedom from debt would have in some regards been equated with freedom itself, and an act such as reducing a debt this significantly would have guaranteed some type of reciprocity.¹⁴ On top of this general consideration, the amounts of the debts owed by the two debtors outlined in the parable are considerably large. The debt of the first debtor is equivalent to 800-900 gallons of oil or three years of work for a day laborer.¹⁵ For both debtors, the steward's reduction is equivalent to two years of work, likely too high to added on as the steward's commission.¹⁶ In addition, in the Middle East and India, the cultural pattern in villages is for any type of unjust commissions to be off the record, therefore not included within the language of the promissory note itself.¹⁷ Lastly and perhaps most importantly, as seen in a second century Greco-Roman contract granting authority to act as an agent (as presumably the steward was), the actions of the agent in reducing the debts would have been binding, as actions of the steward represented the very actions of the

¹³ D. E. Oakman, "Jesus and Agrarian Palestine: The Factor of Debt." Pages 65-82 in *The Social World of the New Testament: Insights and Models*. (Edited by Jerome H. Neyrey and Eric C. Stewart. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008), 65.

¹⁴ K.R. Snodgrass, *Stories*, 406.

¹⁵ Snodgrass, *Stories*, 406.

¹⁶ Snodgrass, *Stories*, 206.

¹⁷ K. E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 90.

master himself.¹⁸ In light of both linguistic and historical-cultural considerations, the steward, out of his desperation and in a ‘last-ditch’ effort to secure his future, acts on his master’s behalf and reduces debts, rightfully earning him the characterization as ‘unjust steward’ (verse eight). The master does not commend the steward’s continued unjust behavior (nor does he address it at all), but merely commends the steward’s shrewd behavior in seeming to find a way out of imminent danger. Nolland summarizes this point well when he says, “...this new third-party situation keeps the transferred wealth out of his [the master’s] reach (presumably nothing remains of the master’s earlier losses). The master’s redress seems to be still limited to the dismissal of the steward. The steward has acted very cleverly indeed! He has found a way forward where there seemed to be none.”¹⁹

Arriving at the Metaphorical or Second-Level of Meaning

To arrive at a metaphorical meaning that remains faithful to the text takes even closer observation. The reader has been given a large clue into the second-level of meaning by reading the interpretation given within verses nine through thirteen. Whether these verses can be attributed to Jesus’ original interpretation or to a later addition by Luke, it is hard to tell. However, there is evidence in both the rabbinic and ancient literature that parables are followed by short explanations.²⁰ Verse 13 is quoted word-for-word from Matthew 6:24, so it can be assumed that this verse did not originally accompany the parable as an explanation; however, the other three verses could likely have been original. These four verses will be invaluable in testing various theories and determining meaning.

¹⁸ _____, *BGU 1,300 (Greco-Roman Writings)* as quoted in Snodgrass, *Stories*, 403.

¹⁹ J. Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34* (WBC 35B; Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 800.

²⁰ M. Boucher, “The Mysterious,” 31.

As with the discussion of the literal meaning, one is wise to begin with the clues to meaning given within the linguistic expressions themselves. Of primary importance is the translation of μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας; Is it ‘mammon of unrighteousness’ (ESV, KJV) or ‘dishonest mammon’ (NRSV) as many have suggested? Qumran has shed light on this phrase, identifying it as an idiom for all money or ‘worldly wealth.’²¹ This softens the controversy that naturally arises from this verse: Is Jesus desiring for the disciples to acquire wealth by unjust means, like the steward in the parable? Certainly not. A second point of consideration is the use of ἀληθινὸν ‘the true (wealth)’ in verse 11. This word specifically refers to what is characteristic of the new age (see also John 1:9, 6:32; et al.; Heb 8:2, 9:24) and that which eternally remains.²² Jesus is clearly employing language to invite the reader to think about the connecting points between this parable and the kingdom that is yet to come (and furthermore, the new age that he has inaugurated). Jesus furthers this contrast by employing the term οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνας ‘the sons of this age’ as opposed to the sons of light, those that belong to the new kingdom. Lastly, this connection to living in light of the new kingdom is reinforced by using the word ἐκλίπη in verse nine, which could be translated ‘when you go bankrupt.’²³ Surely, Jesus is not giving the disciples a lesson on what to do should they go bankrupt; instead, he is urging them to think with a new perspective: that of eternity.

Given Luke’s purpose of writing a διήγησιν or ‘an orderly narrative,’ (Luke 1:1) one would expect to find keys to meaning by looking at the parable’s location, both in Luke’s gospel and the full Luke-Acts narrative. The parable immediately follows the parable of the prodigal

²¹ C. L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 326.

²² H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGNTC; Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 623.

²³ BAGD, 305.

son and it is clear that Luke is tying these passages together in several ways. The use of specific wording (namely διασκοπίζω) has already been mentioned, but in addition, the basic plot of both parables is essentially the same: a steward (the younger brother in Luke 15) is entrusted with wealth and squanders it in his own foolishness, setting the reader up to anticipate the conclusion: What will happen to the man who has been reckless with that which has been entrusted to him? Both parables end in a way that is shocking: the prodigal is shown mercy and welcomed home by his father and the steward is commended for acting shrewdly in his final hours. It seems that neither bear the consequences of their foolish actions. It is true that the parable of Luke 16 introduces material addressing the use of wealth, but it seems as if Luke's intentions are deeper than simply the use of wealth itself.

Although the parable has no explicit Old Testament references, C.A. Evans has suggested that Luke's central section (9:51 - 19:27) corresponds to the contents and order of Deuteronomy 1 - 26.²⁴ This section is often labelled as Luke's 'travel narrative' to Jerusalem, a time of teaching what it looks like to live as a disciple in light of Jesus' mission and impending death. But what would Luke be trying to accomplish by relating the contents of this section to the Deuteronomic laws? The initial connections are clear: Jesus initiates a new kingdom that is not based on the Law, but instead on following Jesus himself. However, what does following Jesus look like in light of the Law? Luke's intention becomes clearer as one observes a few examples. In the parable of the good samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Luke alludes to the law governing Israel's interactions with foreign nations, protecting them from the danger of adopting their ways and

²⁴ C. A. Evans, "Old Testament in the Gospels," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 587.

breaking covenant with YHWH.²⁵ Unexpectedly, it is the Samaritan woman who fulfills the obligations of the covenant by showing mercy.²⁶ The parable of the prodigal son also relates to the law in an unexpected way; the father embraces the son despite his reckless past, an obvious transgression of Deuteronomy 21:18-21 which prescribes the punishment of stoning for rebellious sons that will not heed their parent's voice.²⁷ The parable of the unjust steward corresponds to laws concerning the treatment of unemployed slaves (Deut 23:15-16).²⁸ The law allows for slaves that have escaped their master to find a place of refuge where they will not be in fear of being given back up to their master. The law was intended to protect slaves from abusive masters, yet ironically, in the parable of the unjust steward, the master is the one needing protection from further squandering on the part of his steward. Luke's aim in tying these parables to the Law is to reinforce the point that Jesus has inaugurated a new kingdom in which love, grace and mercy triumph. This should transform the perspective of his followers.

Lastly, the parable should be seen in light of Luke's narrative as a whole, comprised of both his Gospel and the book of Acts. Luke's purpose in writing his narrative in the context of Christian opposition was two-part: to remind his readers of God's redemptive work and character and encourage them to continue Jesus' legacy in seeking and saving the lost.²⁹ Luke anticipated that the people of God needed a change of perspective in light of the opposition they were facing. To obtain a change in perspective, Luke posited that the people of God should look no further

²⁵ C. A. Evans, "Old Testament" in *Dictionary*, 587.

²⁶ C. A. Evans, "Old Testament" in *Dictionary*, 587.

²⁷ C. A. Evans, "Old Testament" in *Dictionary*, 587.

²⁸ C. A. Evans, "Old Testament" in *Dictionary*, 587.

²⁹ J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 21-22.

than the arrival of Jesus as the one who has inaugurated the kingdom, a metaphorical Year of Jubilee. The Year of Jubilee was seen as an intensified Sabbath Year in which slaves were freed, debts were cancelled, the land was fallowed and land was returned.³⁰ Luke intentionally shapes his Gospel and the book of Acts with this as a central motif. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus reads from Isaiah, Scripture containing ideas and words that are full of the themes of Jubilee. These themes re-surface again and again in both his Gospel account and in Acts. It is important to note that the theological basis behind the Year of Jubilee is a reminder that YHWH is the true owner of everything; therefore, slaves nor land could ever truly be sold.³¹ Although the cancellation of debts in the parable of the unjust steward offers a literal connection point to the events of the Year of Jubilee, Jesus offers a deeper meaning, an alternative perspective that transforms the lives of the disciples. Like the Year of Jubilee brings drastic change and a perspective shift that all things belong to YHWH, so the arrival of Jesus and anticipation of the age to come should bring drastic change in the lives of his disciples. In Jesus, the “last days” have arrived and an entirely new epoch of redemptive history has begun.

After assessing linguistic, historical-cultural and contextual matters, both Jesus and Luke’s intention has become more clear. The parable of the unjust steward functions not to commend (or even overlook!) dishonest actions, but rather to commend radical action in light of the inauguration of the kingdom of God. The Year of Jubilee was only a foreshadow of what was to come; Jesus has inaugurated the true Year of Jubilee by bringing God’s reign on earth, a reign of grace and mercy, but also justice. In light of Jesus’ arrival, the disciples must steward everything, certainly not limited to their possessions, in light of what they have been given and

³⁰ R. B. Sloan, “Jubilee” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 397.

³¹ R.B. Sloan, “Jubilee” in *Dictionary*, 397.

what they will receive. This is the clearest application derived from verse nine immediately following the parable: “Make friends for yourselves by means of worldly wealth, so that whenever it is gone, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings of the life to come.” Jesus invites the disciples to embrace the radical perspective of the Year of Jubilee: everything belongs to YHWH, therefore, steward what you have been given to further God’s eternal purposes. Verses ten and eleven build off of this same principle, reminding the disciples that their stewardship of worldly wealth governs how much they will be entrusted with eternal wealth and reminding them that true allegiance to both God and wealth is impossible. In a way, this echoes the idea in Matthew’s Gospel to “seek first the kingdom of God” (6:33) and allow your new master to take care of your earthly needs.

Summary and Conclusions

Jesus’ exhortation to his disciples to act in light of the arrival (and coming) of the kingdom has clear echoes throughout the rest of the New Testament. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says “you are not your own, you were bought with a price...” (6:19a ESV) to lay the groundwork for an ethical imperative: “So glorify God with your body” (6:16b ESV). Elsewhere, the church is urged by Peter to live as sojourners: “I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Pet 2:11 ESV). Throughout the New Testament, the church is reminded that their identity in Christ, their presence in the new kingdom, should be the motive behind transformed actions. They are constantly reminded that what Jesus has done in the history of redemption should produce radically new action that aligns with Jesus’ own character. The age that was prophesied in which

the law would be written on their hearts (Ezekiel 11:19) has come to fruition; therefore, consider what Jesus has done and act shrewdly!

APPENDIX

TRANSLATION: LUKE 16:1-13 from Nestle-Aland 27

1. And he was also saying to the disciples, “There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and this one [the steward] was reported to him as squandering his possessions. 2. And after calling him, he said to him, ‘What [is] this I am hearing concerning you? Produce an audit of your management, for you are no longer capable to manage.’ 3. Then the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking away the management from me? I am not strong enough to dig, I am ashamed to beg. 4. I know what I shall do, so that whenever I am removed from the management, they will welcome me into their homes.’ 5. And after summoning each one of his master’s debtors he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ 6. And he said, ‘One hundred jugs of olive oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Grasp your promissory note, sit down quickly and write fifty.’ 7. Then to another he said, ‘And you, how much do you owe?’ And he said, ‘One-hundred cors of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Grasp your promissory note and write eighty.’ 8. And the master praised the unjust manager because he acted shrewdly, for the sons of this age [are] more shrewd than the sons of light are (in relation to their own kind).

9. And I say to you all, make friends for yourselves by means of worldly wealth, so that whenever it is gone, they will welcome you into the eternal dwellings of the life to come. 10. The one who is trustworthy in an insignificant thing is also trustworthy in much, and the one who is unjust in a trivial thing is also unjust in much. 11. If therefore with worldly wealth you were not trustworthy, who will entrust to you the eternal [wealth]? 12. And if, with what belongs to another, you are not trustworthy, who will give to you your own? 13. No slave is capable of being dedicated to two masters, for either he will disregard the one and the other he will love, or he will be devoted to the one and he will despise the other. You are not able to serve God and wealth.

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